

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., bolstered this view with *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution* (New York: Longmans, 1918), in which he found that merchants in all the colonies spearheaded the opposition at first against the Stamp and Trade Acts. When, however, they discovered their movement encouraged men lower in the social hierarchy to question their leadership, they drew back from such bold opposition to English control. Only the Tea and Coercive Acts in Schlesinger's opinion provided sufficient provocation to reunite the merchants with the more radical elements of society in favor of open rebellion against British rule. As the capstone of this interpretation, Charles Beard in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913) portrayed the foundation document of the federal union as the work of conservative upper-class men to foster their own economic welfare by inventing a system of government directly benefitting their own economic interests at the expense of the bulk of small farmers and tradesmen and by forcing this document through ratifying conventions before the majority of Americans understood what was happening.

According to these historians and others who followed their lead, the course of the Revolution moved from conservatives demanding colonial rights, to radicals seeking the rights of men as opposed to property in the Declaration of Independence, to a counter-revolution of the conservatives culminating in the adoption of the Constitution and the temporary repression of the lower classes. It remained for Merrill Jensen to finish this picture by showing in *Articles of Confederation* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940) and *New Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950) that the history of the whole Revolutionary era resulted from the struggle for power between two continuous and consistently opposed groups based upon socio-economic cleavages fundamental in the American society of the time. On one side were most members of the colonial upper classes and nouveau riche of the Revolution who favored stronger central government always as means to check lower-class democracy and to regulate trade and pass taxes in their interest. In opposition to these "nationalists" were the "federalists," or the democratic radicals, who favored decentralization of government in the interests of the agrarian democratic views of the majority of the population. For Jensen, as for the others of this school, the ideals expressed in the polemics of the period determined less the actual behavior of the Founding Fathers than their economic interests, and the significant story of the Revolution was found more in the internal conflict of social classes based upon economic power than in the external struggle with England.

After World War II, the progressive version of the causes, nature, and consequences of the Revolution was denied by such writers as Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, Benjamin Wright, and most important, Edmund

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Edited by

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*The University of Wisconsin*



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# INTRODUCTION

Before a historian can explain the whys of the American Revolution, he must figure out what it was; and its nature is as perplexing and controversial a problem in historical circles as the explanation of its causes. To professional historians, the phrase "American Revolution" means more than the hostilities between England and thirteen of her colonies. It refers also to the social, economic, and political changes in the colonies that they presume caused, accompanied, or resulted from the conflict. Historians, therefore, usually have grouped their questions about the nature, causes, and consequences of the Revolution around three images:

1. A war of independence between colonies and a mother country. Who initiated the hostilities? When and where did the conflict start? What were the issues? Did the conflict result from the grievances voiced shortly before the war broke out, or did it result from long-term trends? Who were the individuals involved upon both sides and why? What was the rebels' aim? Was it independence or some accommodation within the empire? Why were just thirteen of England's North American colonies involved? Why was it a war of rebellion rather than a guerrilla war or a palace revolution?

2. A political revolution. Did the colonies revolt to preserve the basic political system they had or to establish a new kind of government? Why? Were there political innovations despite the aims of the revolutionaries, and, if so, why? What was new about the political results of the Revolution? Was it a new type of revolution at the time? Can it be compared to other revolutions at the time, such as the French Revolution? Can it be compared to the revolutions to establish new nations today?

3. A social revolution. Was the American Revolution a social revolution as well as a political revolution? If so, why; if not, why not? What is the model for the meaning of the word "revolution"? How do we judge a set of events to be a revolution? Is the American Revolution comparable to other full-scale revolutions or not? What is the relationship between the social structure of a country and a revolution in general and the social structure of the American colonies and the American Revolution in particular?

These questions suggest the whole problem of comparability as an important way of describing what the American Revolution was and explaining why it was what it was. In other words, we must try to determine



what was “American” about the American Revolution and what was revolutionary about it in order to discuss its nature, causes, and consequences.

Answers to all these questions depend as much upon the historian’s theories about human behavior as upon the evidence he discovers about past human actions. In fact, he cannot interpret the evidence about the past without employing his theories about the nature of man and society to make sense of it. The credence the historian gives the multitude of pamphlets, newspapers, and letters written by the participants in the Revolution directly reflects his belief whether professed ideals or something else better explains why men did what they did. For example, should the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence be taken at face value in explaining why the colonists went to war with England? In other words, is there a difference between rationale and motivation, and how do we differentiate between them? Are there deeper causes for human behavior than men of the time say or even understand fully? How do we know whether to trust words or deeds more in seeking to understand the American Revolution? How does the historian know the real reasons for such a complex occurrence as the Revolution? Ultimately each student of history must combine the evidence from the past with his theories of how men act and societies operate in order to derive the “facts” he says happened and that he calls history.

The historian must use his theories of man and society to interpret his evidence in another way also, for he asserts facts about a whole society upon the basis of documents produced by a few of its members. How representative of the people of their time were Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, or John and Sam Adams? Were their aims also the goals of all segments of the population? Or, did they desire some end quite different from what they told the public? What is the role of leaders in a revolution, and what relationship do they bear to the society of their day? Were some groups of people quite unrepresented by any of the spokesmen for the Revolution? Did most colonists support the war? Did they even care about it? How do we know when so little evidence about their thoughts remains? Should the analyst presume a societal consensus on Revolutionary goals, excepting Tories of course, in order to interpret his evidence? Or, should he assume agreement on goals was due to majority compromise, or public apathy, or coerced submission, or all of these in combination? Again the historian resorts as much to his theories of culture and society as he does to his evidence in constructing the synthesis of facts that he calls history.

So fundamental are these questions about theoretical orientations and so complex the set of events called the Revolution that historians today are no more in agreement upon the answers about the nature, causes, and consequences of the Revolution than were contemporary observers. Now as then some historians focus their attention on the battle of ideas and ideals

expressed in the polemical literature of the period. For them the Revolution was fought for political and constitutional ends and the society as a whole subscribed to these aims. Still other observers, then as now, picture the Revolutionary leaders as seeking only selfish political and economic ends behind their propaganda of ideals. To these analysts, the Revolution was perpetrated by an elite which sought to retain or gain political office and social status denied to them by the British imperial system. To attain their economic and political goals, according to this view, the Revolutionary leaders not only challenged English sovereignty and control but also repressed the demands of the masses for the very rights and ideals the leaders proclaimed they were denied in their polemics against England.

Although these two interpretations have existed since the Revolution, their fullest formulation has come in the twentieth century. One group of historians, led by Charles McLean Andrews in the 1920s and Lawrence Henry Gipson more recently, sought to place the colonists' aims and activities in the larger context of the British Empire. Hence, they are called the imperial school. In looking at the colonial struggle in terms of the imperial system, they generally took at face value the importance of the debates over political representation and the constitutional issues of empire. Opposing this approach were such historians as Carl Becker, Charles Beard, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and, more recently, Merrill Jensen. They portrayed the Revolution as a struggle among different colonial classes for economic and political hegemony in addition to the fight for independence from England. Since this interpretation arose during the Progressive period and featured an economic interpretation of people's motives, it has been named the progressive or economic interpretation school.

According to the progressive school, the Revolution became an internal or class conflict as well as a rebellion against an external power. As one of the chief formulators of this approach, Carl Becker, stated in *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (New York: University of Wisconsin, 1909),

The American Revolution was the result of two general movements; the contest for home-rule and independence, and the democratization of American politics and society. Of these movements, the latter was fundamental; it began before the contest for home-rule, and was not completed until after the achievement of independence. From 1765 to 1776, therefore, two questions, about equally prominent, determined party history. The first was whether essential colonial rights should be maintained; the second was by whom and by what methods they should be maintained. The first was the question of home-rule; the second was the question, if we may so put it, of who should rule at home.